I once came across a reference to a soda fountain concoction popular in the 1930s called a ‘Black & White.” What can you tell me about the history of this drink and how it was made?

The "Black & White" soda fountain drink, popular during the 1930s, was a classic example of the inventive, theatrical, and often regional concoctions that characterized the American soda fountain era. It was especially associated with urban drugstores and ice cream parlors—particularly in places like New York City and Philadelphia—during a time when soda fountains were as much social hubs as they were culinary institutions.

Historical Context

The American soda fountain reached its golden age during the 1920s and 1930s. With Prohibition in effect from 1920 to 1933, alcohol-free gathering spots flourished. Drugstores often housed marble-counter soda fountains offering not just root beer floats and milkshakes but elaborate, layered ice cream creations served by the so-called “soda jerks.” These were young men—often in white uniforms—who mastered the art of mixing syrups, soda water, and ice cream into crowd-pleasing treats.

The *Black & White* drink became one of many “parlor specialties” that customers could order by name, similar to a *Brown Cow* or *Boston Cooler*. While the exact origins of the drink are difficult to pin down, references to it begin appearing in soda fountain manuals, cookbooks, and urban newspaper columns by the 1920s, with more widespread mention during the 1930s.

Composition of a Classic Black & White

The name “Black & White” refers, appropriately, to its contrasting color components—most often, chocolate (black) and vanilla (white). Although there are a few regional and temporal variations, the classic version consisted of the following:

- **Vanilla ice cream** (white)
- **Chocolate syrup** (black)
- **Milk**
- **Seltzer or soda water**
- Optional: whipped cream and a cherry

There are two main styles in which it was prepared:

1. **Milkshake style (sometimes called a “fountain Black & White”):**
    - A generous squirt of chocolate syrup was placed in the bottom of a chilled mixing container.
    - A scoop or two of vanilla ice cream was added, followed by a splash of milk.
    - This was blended with a spindle mixer until frothy and smooth.
    - It was then poured into a tall glass, optionally topped with whipped cream and a cherry.
2. **Float or soda style:**
    - A base of chocolate syrup was added to the glass.
    - Seltzer or carbonated water was poured in and stirred to mix the syrup.
    - A scoop of vanilla ice cream was placed on top, creating the “float.”
    - Sometimes, the soda jerk would layer or drizzle more chocolate syrup over the top for effect.

Some manuals and fountain guides from the 1930s even suggest using chocolate ice cream with vanilla syrup as a “reversed” version, but this was less common. The “Black & White” was not just a taste treat—it was performative, the contrast in colors serving visual flair, and the taste balancing richness with refreshing coolness.

Cultural Significance

This drink was part of a broader trend in the 1930s of naming soda fountain items with evocative, playful, or suggestive titles. The “Black & White” could reflect racial dichotomy, tuxedo fashion (as in “black tie” events), or even moral dualism, which were lightly alluded to in popular culture. It was served in soda fountains alongside others like the “Cherry Smash,” “Green River,” or “Suicide” (a mix of all the syrups).

Decline and Legacy

As soda fountains began to decline post–World War II, with the rise of supermarkets and fast food chains, drinks like the *Black & White* began fading from collective memory. However, some retro diners and ice cream parlors still serve them today, and the drink occasionally appears in nostalgic cookbooks or blogs.

Further Reading

For period sources and recipes:

- *The Dispenser’s Formulary or Soda Water Guide* (various editions from the early 20th century)
- *Soda Fountain Recipes* published by the American Soda Fountain Co.
- Jane and Michael Stern’s *American Gourmet* and *Square Meals*, which revive mid-century food culture
- Contemporary recreations can be found in books like *The Soda Fountain* by Gia Giasullo and Peter Freeman

If you're interested in reproducing it today, a simple home version involves blending:

- 2 tablespoons chocolate syrup
- ½ cup milk
- 2 scoops vanilla ice cream
  Blend until smooth, or serve with seltzer for the float version.